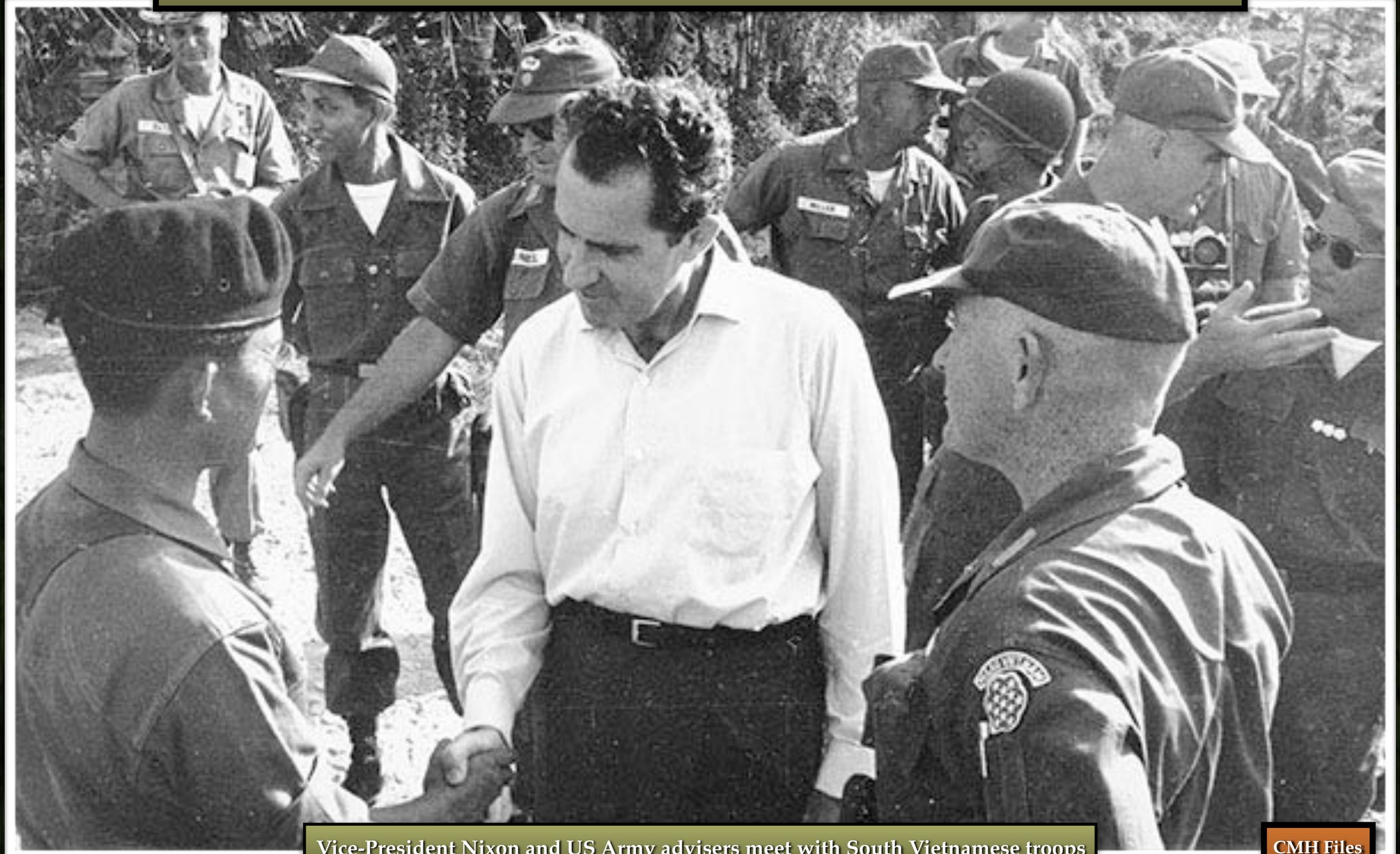
From MAAG Indochina to MAAG Vietnam



Vice-President Nixon and US Army advisers meet with South Vietnamese troops

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The Military Assistance Advisory Group

When the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), Indochina, was approved, General Erskine appointed the U.S. military attache, Col. Lee V. Harris, as acting chief. In September 1950 the first contingent of officers and enlisted men arrived in Saigon and took up temporary quarters at the Base Militaire. Col. P. J. Gillespie, who was senior to Colonel Harris, assumed temporary command, and at the end of the month the Department of Defense selected Brig. Gen. Francis G. Brink as the commander.[43]

Few American officers had gained more experience in Asia than General Brink. Fifty-seven years old at the time of his appointment, he had served three years in the Philippines before World War II, and during the war he had been a military observer in Singapore, the Dutch East Indies, and Burma and then chief of the Operations Division of the Southeast Asia Command. As chief of the Army Advisory Staff in China in 1948 and 1949, he had witnessed the defeat of Chiang Kai-shek's forces. Given that background, General Brink, as he stepped from a plane at Tan Son Nhut Airport on the outskirts of Saigon on 9 October 1950, likely had few illusions about the difficulty of his assignment.

By that time the Military Assistance Advisory Group had grown to about 65 officers and enlisted men and a civilian clerk. The Army section, headed by a colonel, was divided into five branches: Aid Supply, Transport, Technical Services, Logistics, and Operations. Each branch was small, about 6 officers and enlisted men. The single civilian, a clerk-stenographer borrowed from the American legation, was unequal to the large load of administrative paperwork generated by the group, and even after 6 more clerks were added in February 1951 the clerical and administrative staff remained too small.[44]

A serious consequence of the small staff was that the Military Assistance Advisory Group could not monitor adequately the distribution of military equipment. With no one assigned to that job, American officials had to rely on receipts furnished by the French. The advisory group's observation and supervision activities usually amounted to little more than obtaining a French signature for equipment and hoping that the equipment would be distributed as agreed.[45]

The few men of the MAAG Army section worked as inspection teams to observe the use of American equipment by French and Vietnamese military units. According to the terms of the Pentalateral Mutual Defense Assistance Pact—signed by France, the United States, and the Associated States of Indochina on 23 December 1950—which set the ground rules for military assistance, the French were to extend facilities to the advisory group "freely and fully to carry out their assigned responsibilities [for] observation of the progress and the technical use made of the assistance granted."[46] But French officials gave that provision a peculiar interpretation that made the Army inspections far from successful. They allowed no observation of units in


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US surplus equipment given to French forces in Indochina

combat operations, and inspections in the rear areas had to be arranged two months in advance. If the request was approved, the American inspection team, usually an officer and an enlisted man, had to make a formal, almost ceremonial inspection, with the entire unit turned out in formation.[47] A further complication was that few of the inspecting officers and noncommissioned officers spoke French, and none spoke Vietnamese, so most questions and remarks had to be filtered through an interpreter. Under these circumstances, almost all units received ratings of "very good" or "excellent."

General Brink

In contrast, the MAAG Air Force and Navy teams were far more critical of French methods of utilizing aid equipment. French air and naval bases were located in secure areas, and their air and naval craft normally operated from the same bases for weeks or months at a time. The use and maintenance of their equipment thus could be checked more adequately and more frequently.

In mid-1951 the Air Force section was reporting the "bad operational habits" of French mechanics, citing in particular "the lack of appreciation of safety precautions, lack of respect for preventive maintenance," and the "standard French procedure of drinking while working."[48] Later in the year Air Force observers reported that French aircraft were so dirty that checking them thoroughly before and after flights was impossible. Another report noted that insufficient maintenance was draining spare parts: "Under these conditions," the observers concluded, "no amount of logistical support supplied [to the French] . . . will greatly reduce the difficulties now being experienced by the French Air Force in maintaining sufficient aircraft at operational level."[49] Similarly, MAAG Navy inspectors reported in May 1952 that American vessels which had been turned over to the French in excellent condition were now rusty and dirty. The French sailors were also "sloppy and unkempt."[50]

The problem of misuse of equipment was compounded by a tenuous supply line that stretched halfway around the world. The advisory group often had to cope with unexpected shortages or delays. During heavy fighting in 1951 around the town of Vinh Yen, for example, General Brink had to fly to Far East Command headquarters in Tokyo to obtain critical supplies for the French. In June of that year, during fighting in the town of Phat Diem, the French suddenly ran dangerously short of 105-mm. howitzer ammunition. Again General Brink flew to Tokyo to work out an emergency arrangement whereby the French would get ammunition directly from the stockpiles of the Far East Command.[51]

Keeping track of the large amount of equipment continually arriving in Vietnam was even more difficult than coping with shortages. The equipment was shipped directly from the United States, from Japan, from the Joint U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group in France, and from other parts of Europe. Many shipments, especially those from outside the United States, were so inadequately documented that the MAAG personnel could not identify exactly where they came from.[52]

Moreover, despite repeated requests, the French refused to produce any detailed accounting of the American equipment they had received from sources other than the continental United States.[53] Because of an archaic record-keeping system, they were perhaps simply unable to provide the detailed information needed. The first MAAG logistics officer, Lt. Col. S. Fred Cummings, Jr., for example, discovered to his surprise that the French had no stock-control system. "Requisitions were filled," he noted, "without giving recognition to previous unfilled requests." By parceling out his six enlisted men to the principal French supply depots, Cummings succeeded in a few months in establishing at least a makeshift stock-control system.[54]

Another principal MAAG function was to screen aid requests from the French in the light of criteria established by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, by budget ceilings, and by authorized force levels. Yet the group had little information to use in evaluating French requests, since the French from 1951 through 1953 never discussed their strategic plans with the Americans. "We were not too certain just what program the French and Associated States had for Indochina," recalled Colonel Cummings. "They never even provided us with an order of battle."[55]

When they received a draft program or request from the French, American officers would carefully review it, blue-pencil questionable items, and then ask the French to provide more information on those items.[56] Yet even when the information did not come, American examiners seldom went so far as to delete an item. "When there was doubt," one officer recalled, "material was left in the program."[57]

Even that light-handed policy failed to satisfy the French. In January 1951, General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, then commander in chief in Indochina, heatedly complained to Minister Heath that subordinate MAAG officers were requiring "excessive justification" for French aid requests. Many of the French requests had been turned down, he said, and the Americans "appeared to have lost interest in Indochina." They now seemed to be "more interested in arming Europe." After a thorough investigation, General Brink could find no evidence to substantiate de Lattre's charges. As far as he could determine, no member of the advisory group had ever refused to consider French requests for military equipment.[58]

General de Lattre's accusation was but a symptom of French suspicion and resentment. The Military Assistance Advisory Group was a continuing reminder that the French could no longer go it alone in Southeast Asia. It was also tangible evidence to the Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians that their French patrons were themselves dependent upon a far more powerful patron, one that might someday replace the French as protectors of Indochina. Even before the last contingents of the advisory group had arrived, the French commander in chief at the time, General Carpentier, had already complained that the group was too large. He was, Consul Gullion noted, at best lukewarm over the prospect of American aid.[59]

The refusal of the French to recognize the importance, or even the necessity, of an adivsory group hindered all aspects of the group's operations. The American headquarters building, for example, at 284 Rue Cai May in the Cholon section of Saigon, was old and inadequate. The rickety five-story structure was located next door to a brothel much favored by troops of the French foreign legion. Around five o'clock each afternoon the noise in the crowded Rue Cai May would rise to a crescendo as trucks and busloads of legionnaires trooped into the house.[60]

No billets were provided for officers, enlisted men, or dependents. Members of the advisory group lived in old hotels described by the embassy as unfit to live in and bad for the morale, efficiency, and health of the personnel billeted in them.[61] The Army inspector general noted that billeting facilities in Vietnam for enlisted men without dependents were especially poor and that medical support for dependents was almost nonexistent except for that provided by local civilian doctors.[62] When Minister Heath raised the question of more adequate housing with the French high commissioner, he was gruffly asked, "Yours is a rich country, why don't you build houses?"[63]

In a host of minor ways the French made life difficult for the advisory group. The entire cost of renovating and remodeling the headquarters, for

General Jean de Latter de Tassigny

Minister Donald R. Heath (left) with Norodom Sihanouk, Prime Minister of Cambodia, and Vice-President Nixon

example, was charged to the Americans even though the French retained title to the property. The French also billed the United States for such items as telephones, other utilities, and janitorial services, despite Minister Heath's protest that these items were normally charged against the governments of countries receiving American aid.[64] The French also imposed a stiff luxury tax and an import duty on such equipment as fans, washing machines, and refrigerators, even though the items were the property of the advisory group rather than of individuals.

After General de Lattre arrived and the Communists opened large-scale offensives in the fall and winter of 1950, the French attitude underwent some change. Consul Gullion attributed the change to "recognition that the recent Viet Minh assaults were repulsed only with [the help of] American weapons." In public statements, General de Lattre duly credited the part played by American military equipment in the victories at Vinh Yen and Mao Khe. After a time de Lattre even conceded to the Americans the right to know some details of his tactical plans, a concession never made by his predecessors. Yet once the first flush of those victories passed, General de Lattre and his staff came to adopt a "somewhat more grudging attitude toward U.S. aid."[65] De Lattre was heard to remark that Minister Heath "was a dupe, presenting an honest face while all sorts of American machinations were transpiring behind our backs." The American legation observed that "we are confronted with a sudden access of suspicion and objection to American operations and policy in Vietnam."[66] In April 1951 de Lattre told Heath that there were "entirely too many Americans in Indochina." He placed the figure at around 700, more than three times the actual number.[67]

De Lattre directed much of his hostility and suspicion at an American group known as the Special Technical and Economic Mission (STEM). The purpose of this mission was to "provide direct support to the Franco-Vietnamese forces" through a variety of social, medical, technical, and civil works programs. Its varied projects included road repair, bridge construction, public health, agricultural assistance, land reclamation, and technical training. Unlike military aid projects, STEM projects were negotiated directly with the governments of the Associated States, and they were administered jointly by the Americans and those governments.

That direct contact between American and Vietnamese officials worried French authorities. Some members of the special mission, they asserted, "may have been taken in by the more extreme nationalists."[68] STEM technicians and administrators did tend to be considerably less sympathetic to the problems of the French, and more concerned with promoting the self-reliance of the Bao Dai government than were members of the advisory group.[69] The

sheer size and expense of many STEM projects also were disconcerting to the French. In the Cholon area of Saigon, for example, the mission built a demonstration low-cost housing project, the Cite Nguyen Tri Phuong, with over a thousand housing units, forty-four commerical buildings, a school, a dispensary, and a police station. That kind of project, the French complained, "belittled them in the eyes of the Vietnamese."[70] When the French tried to counter STEM influence with whispering campaigns and with planted anti-American articles in the controlled local press, the resulting general atmosphere of jealousy and suspicion only complicated the task of the Military Assistance Advisory Group to establish effective Franco-American cooperation.

In Washington, meanwhile, the National Security Council had established an interdepartmental Southeast Asia Aid Policy Committee in 1950 to develop basic policy guidelines for all American assistance to Southeast Asia. The committee was primarily a consultative group. It monitored the workings of the Mutual Defense Assistance Program and the Economic Aid and the Technical Assistance ("Point 4") Programs administered by the Economic Cooperation Administration. The Aid Policy Committee had no direct operational responsibility for any of those programs, but it was responsible for ensuring that major policy directives in regard to Southeast Asia aid programs were carried out.[71]

Military assistance for Southeast Asia was also subject to the supervision of the interagency Foreign Military Assistance Coordinating Committee, which directed all American military assistance abroad. The relationship between this committee and the Southeast Asia Aid Policy Committee was never clearly spelled out, but the latter exercised a vague mandate to ensure that the military assistance programs implemented by the Foreign Military Assistance Coordinating Committee produced no unfavorable political repercussions.[72] Within the Department of Defense the military assistance program was administered by the Office of Military Assistance under the direction of the Office of the Secretary of Defense. With the completion of these arrangements in Washington, the mechanics of American aid were settled, yet many observers wondered whether French forces in Indochina, with Chinese Communist troops just to the north, would survive long enough to benefit from that aid.

Most American officials regarded the Geneva Agreements as a major defeat for United States policy in Southeast Asia. Under terms of a separate military agreement between the French and the Viet Minh, Vietnam was partitioned along the 17th Parallel.[1] Armed forces of the Viet Minh were to regroup north of the parallel, French forces to the south. No new equipment or troops were to be introduced into Vietnam except as replacements, a proviso to be supervised by an International Control Commission (ICC) composed of representatives of India, Poland, and Canada.

On 21 July 1954 a majority of the governments participating in the conference—the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, France, the United Kingdom, Cambodia, Laos, and the Viet Minh—adopted a final declaration confirming the military agreements and adding a provision that general elections were to be held in July 1956 under the supervision of the commission. Neither the United States nor the Bao Dai government (known as the State of Vietnam) concurred in the final declaration, although the United States pledged to "refrain from the threat or the use of force to disturb" the agreements while warning that "it would view any renewal of aggression in violation of the . . . agreements with grave concern and as seriously threatening international peace and security."[2]

Although American officials adopted a public attitude of guarded optimism toward the agreements, private assessments were gloomy. The G–3 Plans Division of the Army staff observed that American prestige and influence in Southeast Asia had been seriously lowered and Communist influence correspondingly increased by the Geneva Agreements. As a result the achievement of U.S. objectives in Southeast Asia had become "far more difficult and costly."[3] The National Security Council was even more pessimistic, pointing out that the Communists had secured an "advance salient" from which to mount operations against neighboring countries. The council's Operations Coordinating Board declared that the Geneva Agreements represented "a drastic defeat of key [American] policies . . . the psychological and political effects of which will be felt throughout the Far East and around the globe."[4] "I think this is going to be looked back on as a great mistake," predicted Admiral Radford to Vice President Nixon. "It is a black day for us," the vice president agreed.[5]

Until Dien Bien Phu the two principal goals of the Army, and of other American agencies, had been to foster a genuinely independent State of Vietnam with its own army and to have a strong voice in forming and training that army. Ironically, both of those objectives were substantially achieved only after Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva settlement had rendered them irrelevant for Vietnam as a whole. Independence was largely attained on 3 June 1954 with the initialing by France and the Bao Dai government of

been developing a plan for a general offensive against the Viet Minh, code named REDLAND and based on a plan developed in 1949 by General James A. Van Fleet for the Greek Army in its war against indigenous Communist guerrillas. O'Daniel wanted to consolidate the eighty-odd battalions of the Vietnamese Army into nine divisions while keeping eight light battalions as a reserve to occupy areas won from the enemy. He intended the French to provide air and naval support; the United States would supply additional military assistance and division-level advisers.[11]

A three-phase operation, REDLAND was to be completed within two years. First, three Vietnamese divisions were to clear the Cochin peninsula and the Mekong Delta. In phase two an amphibious task force was to seize Bong Son and Vinh in central Vietnam, joining with a larger force from the south. In the final phase the Vietnamese divisions, having gained experience and confidence in the earlier actions, were to join with French Union forces to destroy the Viet Minh in the Red River Delta.[12] "The whole idea," O'Daniel later recalled, "was to create enthusiasm and increasing momentum as we went along."[13] The operation was to be accompanied "by an intense psychological warfare campaign to convince the people that the Associated States' armies symbolized the independence" of the states and that "the powerful Vietnamese army [was] piling up victory after victory for the security of all."[14] To provide the troops for the operation, General O'Daniel hoped to expand and strengthen the Vietnamese training program, using American methods and concepts. More training facilities, including a command and general staff college, an amphibious training center, and a specialist training center, were to be established and Vietnamese officers and noncommissioned officers sent to training schools in the United States.[15]

Since General Van Fleet had devised the original plan, O'Daniel and a special assistant, Lt. Col. William R. Rosson, took advantage of a visit by Van Fleet to Hong Kong to present their plan to him; Van Fleet promptly endorsed it. General Ely, on the other hand, was unimpressed. He found the plan too complex and believed it to be "unrealistic [because] it gave priority to operations in the south while the principal and immediate threat [was] in the north."[16]

Ely was nevertheless becoming ever more interested in American training of the Vietnamese Army. At the beginning of June 1954, he formally requested that O'Daniel and the United States join France in organizing and training the Army of Vietnam.[17] O'Daniel told General Ridgway that his first priority would be to reorganize the Vietnamese Army into regiment- and division-size units. Because most Vietnamese battalions were committed to static defensive operations and General Navarre was reluctant to pull them

Lt. Gen. John O'Daniel

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Robert McClintock

two treaties which recognized Vietnam as "a fully independent and sovereign state invested with all the competence recognized by international law." Yet those treaties, while ostensibly applying to all of Vietnam, were concluded less than seven weeks before the agreement at Geneva effectively created two separate countries, a Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) and a State of Vietnam (South Vietnam). Only the latter was in any meaningful way under the jurisdiction of the Bao Dai government.

Reorganizing the Vietnamese Army

The United States now also achieved its other aim, a role in training a Vietnamese Army. Although the French had long resisted any such American role, as their military position had grown more precarious in the spring of 1954 they had become more amenable. By early May General Ely had consented to allow Americans to participate in training the Vietnamese Army as well as to place U.S. advisers with Vietnamese units. The French command would, however, retain operational control.

By that time American officials were beginning to reconsider the French offer. From Saigon, Charge d'Affaires Robert McClintock observed that "the complete apathy of the Vietnamese populace . . . the absolute breakdown of the mobilization plan, internecine rivalries between the few men capable of showing leadership and the lack of leadership from Bao Dai and his ministries" all made the task of increasing the effectiveness of the Vietnamese Army in a relatively short time extremely difficult, if not impossible.[6] Army Chief of Staff Ridgway, commenting on what he called Ely's "ironic offer," warned that the assumption of responsibility by the United States for training and leading Vietnamese forces "while the French still retained overall control would put the U.S. in an invidious position, where we would be blamed for failures even though these failures were beyond our control and authority."[7]

General O'Daniel, however, was anxious to proceed. On 13 May he urged that the United States act quickly before the end of the Geneva Conference to expand the Military Assistance Advisory Group and to reorganize the Vietnamese Army into 9 divisions.[8] O'Daniel wanted 4 light and 5 medium divisions, each to consist of 3 regiments of 3 battalions. The light divisions would have only shoulder weapons and light mortars; the medium divisions, some artillery and heavy mortars.[9]

Despite the disaster at Dien Bien Phu, General O'Daniel believed that the war in Indochina could still be won.[10] Since early March he and his staff had

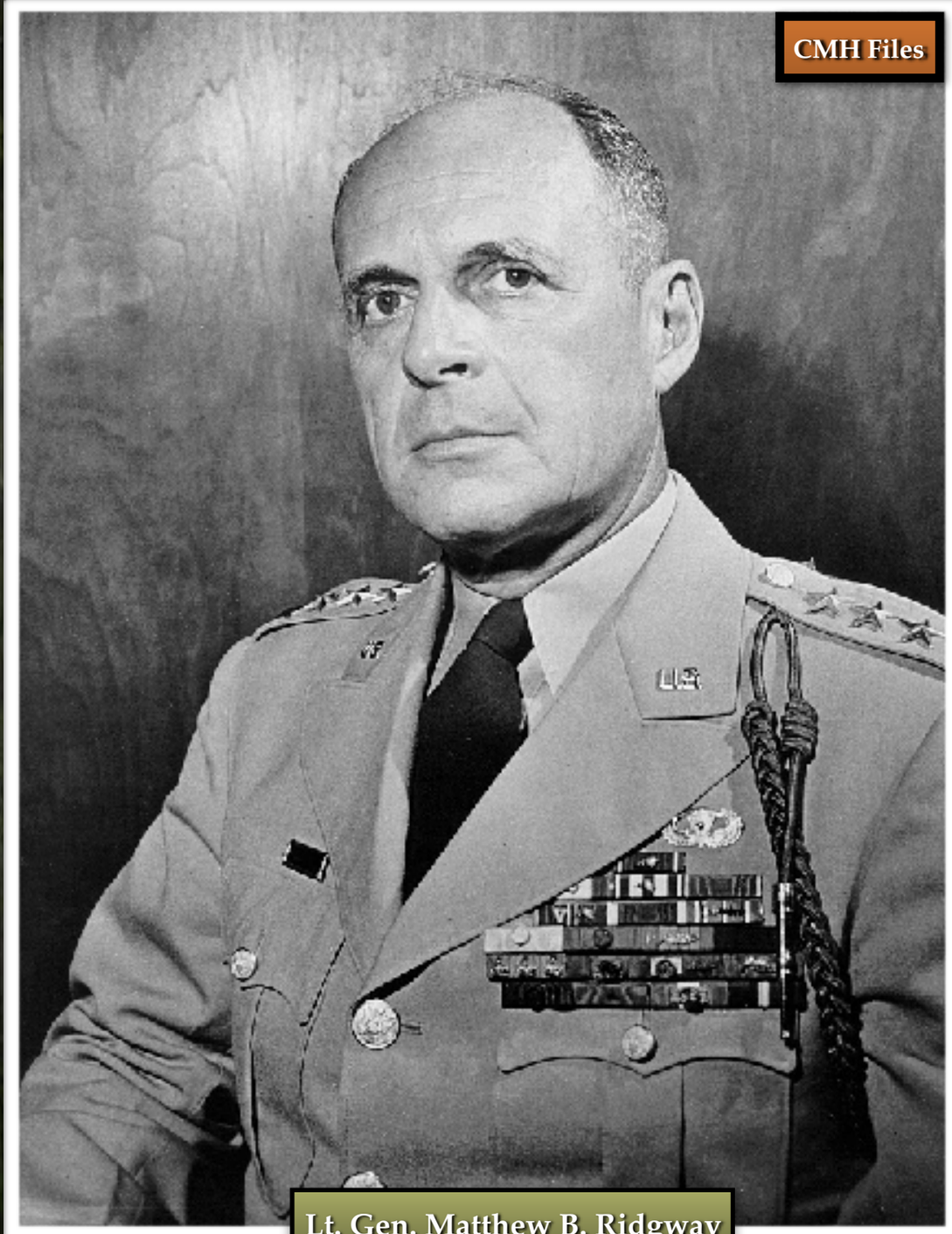
out for reorganization and training, O'Daniel suggested withdrawing a few officers and noncommissioned officers from each battalion to form cadres for new battalions and regiments. Again the French were unenthusiastic. "Navarre did state," noted O'Daniel, "that if the Vietnamese could furnish the men and the U.S. the equipment he would have no objections. He may have felt this was a safe statement. I sure would like to call him on it."[18]

By that time Washington was becoming wary of all French proposals. Secretary of State Dulles suspected that Ely's request might be part of a French scheme "to draw the U.S. into [the Vietnam] conflict without having U.S. conditions on intervention met." Other American officials feared that the military situation had already degenerated to such a point that a training program, no matter how well conceived, would have no chance of influencing the outcome.[19]

O'Daniel protested any delay in undertaking a training program.[20] He believed that a liberal reading of the Military Assistance Advisory Group's directive to perform "end use checks of American equipment" could be rationalized as a cover to begin reorganizing the Vietnamese Army.[21] When his intentions became known in Washington, General Ridgway issued explicit instructions that O'Daniel was to "make no commitments whatsoever in regard to training."[22] A few days later, however, Secretary Dulles directed that O'Daniel might "assist by advising in the training activities of the Vietnam National Army" and approved augmenting the Military Assistance Advisory Group by ninety spaces. The key word was apparently "advising," for the sanction was "not to be construed as U.S. approval of a MAAG Training Mission."[23]

Even after the Geneva Conference, General O'Daniel continued his appeals for authority to form a training mission. Vietnam, O'Daniel believed, would prove a testing ground for determining the ability of the United States "to combat the kind of warfare Communist troops would hope to employ everywhere, including the United States."[24]

For most American leaders, however, the reluctance to assume responsibility for training had grown even stronger. On 2 August 1954 General Ridgway, who had long opposed American intervention in Indochina, recommended that "before the United States assumes responsibility for training the forces of any of the Associated States" four essential conditions should be met. The conditions, which would consititute the position of the Joint Chiefs of Staff for the next five months, were:



Lt. Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway

Ngo Dinh Diem

(1) A reasonably strong, stable, civil government in control. It is hopeless to expect a U.S. military training mission to achieve success unless the nation concerned is able to effectively perform [its] governmental functions.
(2) The government of the Associated States should formally request that the United States assume responsibility for training its forces.
(3) Arrangements should be made with the French . . . providing for the phased orderly withdrawal of French forces, French officials and French advisors from Indochina. The United States from the beginning should insist on dealing directly with the governments of the respective Associated States.
(4) The size and composition of the forces of each of the Associated States should be dictated by the local military requirements and the overall U.S. interests.[25]

Diem Comes to Power

In the summer of 1954 those conditions appeared unlikely to be fulfilled. In South Vietnam a strong and stable civil government seemed especially far from realization. A government with Ngo Dinh Diem as prime minister, which had taken office in Saigon on 7 July 1954, talked bravely of achieving real independence and victory over communism, but in fact it was in a precarious position. Although Diem had a reputation for incorruptible honesty and uncompromising nationalism, he was also inexperienced, shy, dogmatic, and relatively unknown outside his native Annam. Bao Dai offered him little support, the French were suspicious of his ultranationalism, and most other South Vietnamese leaders, unwilling to be associated with a government that might well collapse, held themselves aloof. The government as instituted consisted primarily of Diem's relatives.

Born in 1901 in Hue, the new prime minister came from a Catholic mandarin family. After attending the French school of administration in Hue, Diem rose rapidly in the mandarinate. In 1933 he resigned his post as minister of the interior, the most important position in the emperor's government, to protest the French refusal to allow more Vietnamese participation in governing the country. For the next twenty years he held no office. The Japanese offered him a position in their puppet regime after their March 1945 coup, and Ho Chi Minh personally invited him to join the Viet Minh government in 1946, but Diem refused both offers. He left Vietnam in 1950 and spent two years at Maryknoll seminaries in the United States before settling in Europe in 1953. On 7 June 1954 Bao Dai invited Diem to become prime minister. The emperor had little choice—there was simply no other non-Communist leader of Diem's stature who was not tainted by close association with the French.

"Tell me about Diem," an American journalist asked a Vietnamese friend, observing that the prime minister reminded him of a priest. "Not a priest,"

replied the Vietnamese. "A priest at least learns of the world through the confessional. Diem is a monk living behind stone walls. He knows nothing."[26]

The Geneva settlement had denied Diem the heavily Catholic districts of the North, which would have been a basic source of his support. Large areas of South Vietnam were still ruled by Viet Minh shadow governments in rural villages and districts; other regions were under the firm control of two politico-religious sects, the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao, which had their own private armies subsidized by the French.[27] Not even in Saigon was the Diem government in complete command, for a gangster organization, the Binh Xuyen, controlled the city's police. Neither the sects nor the Binh Xuyen were represented in the Diem government.

The National Army of Vietnam had, in the opinion of U.S. observers, experienced "a complete breakdown of combat capabilities since the cease-fire and the stopping of supplies from the United States."[28] On paper the army numbered about 150,000 men plus 35,000 auxiliaries, all organized into some 125 battalions. Many of the battalions were considerably understrength through desertion and defections to the Viet Minh, and all lacked adequate combat support and combat service support units. The best units were the Vietnamese paratroopers, some of whom had fought in the final battles of 1954, but they were few in number. In fact, the army's weakness probably benefited the Diem regime since Chief of Staff Hinh, the son of former Premier Nguyen Van Tam, was Diem's avowed enemy. Counting the French Expeditionary Corps, the armies of the sects and the Binh Xuyen, and Hinh's forces, there were five separate and competing armies in South Vietnam, none fully supporting the Diem government.[29] Facing the Vietnamese and the dwindling French forces were approximately 230,000 veteran Viet Minh regulars organized into nine infantry and two artillery divisions backed by more than 100,000 "Armed People's Militia."[30]

The Decision on Training

Viewing South Vietnam in late summer of 1954—a country burdened with refugees, rent by the power struggles of the sects, and threatened by a formidable Viet Minh presence in the provinces—the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff were reluctant to begin a long-term military training program unless the four conditions set out by General Ridgway could be met. Secretary of State Dulles reasoned differently. Conceding that the Diem government was "far from strong or stable," Dulles believed that "one of the most efficient means of enabling the [South] Vietnamese Government to become strong is to assist it in reorganizing the National Army and in training that army." He suggested that training could be undertaken as one of a number of political and economic measures to strenghen the Vietnamese government.[34] In an informal conversation with Army staff planners Dulles explained that the sole purpose of the reorganized South Vietnamese Army would be to maintain internal security; any external threat would be met by a new regional defense organization for Southeast Asia that was then being discussed in Manila by representatives of the United States, France, Britain, Australia, and various Asian nations. Given the limited mission of the South Vietnamese Army, a force of about 50,000 would be adequate; since that mission was to defend against political subversion, "guidance as to the size and nature of the forces should come from the State Department rather than the Joint Chiefs of Staff." The important thing, Dulles told Deputy Defense Secretary Robert B. Anderson, was "to start training rather than worry about the specific number of people we are prepared to train."[35]

Anderson agreed, as did the other members of the National Security Council and the president, who, on 12 August, approved NSC 5429/1 providing for U.S. assistance, "working through the French only insofar as necessary," in the creation of indigenous military forces for internal security.[36]

The State Department on 18 August notified the French government that the United States intended to assign a training mission to its Military Assistance Advisory Group in Vietnam.[37] Two days later President Eisenhower approved a new policy statement on Southeast Asia, NSC 5429/2, which called upon the United States to "make every possible effort, not openly inconsistent with the U.S. position as to the [Geneva] armistice agreements, to defeat Communist subversion and influence and to maintain and support friendly non-Communist governments" in Indochina and reaffirmed the decision to assist the non-Communist states economically and militarily.[38]

On 8 September representatives of Britain, France, the United States, New Zealand, Australia, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Thailand signed the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty, which established a loose regional defense organization, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). Its members pledged to "act to meet the common danger" in the event of aggression against any of the signatories.[39] Unlike NATO, SEATO would have no standing military forces, and the members made no specific pledge of military action. A separate protocol of the treaty extended its security provisions to Laos, Cambodia, and the "free territory under the jurisdiction of the State of Vietnam" should those nations request assistance.[40]

The Joint Chiefs of Staff, meanwhile, continued a rearguard action against assuming training responsibilities. When the State Department was drafting its letter of 18 August to the French government, the Joint Chiefs objected to the wording on the grounds that the French might interpret it to mean that the United States was prepared to furnish training assistance regardless of French compliance with the American conditions.[41] On 22 September the Joint Chiefs declared that the provisions of the Geneva cease-fire agreement would present a major obstacle to introducing a sufficient number of American training personnel and additional arms and equipment.[42]

But by mid-October 1954 the Joint Chiefs had acceded. While still strongly opposed to a Vietnamese training program, "from a military point of view," they agreed to go along "if it is considered that political considerations are overriding."[43] In fact, the Joint Chiefs were well aware that Dulles, the State Department, and most members of the National Security Council considered precisely those conditions overriding. The outspoken desire of such powerful officials as Secretary Dulles and presidential assistant Robert Cutler to see the training program undertaken may have contributed to their capitulation, and they may also have been aware that President Eisenhower himself wanted it. Only three days after the Joint Chiefs acquiesced, the president told the National Security Council that "in the land of the blind, the one-eyed men are kings. What we want is a Vietnamese force which will support Diem . . . the obvious thing to do is simply to authorize O'Daniel to use up to X millions of dollars to produce the maximum number of Vietnamese units which Prime Minister Diem can depend on to sustain himself in power."[44]

Read literally, the Joint Chiefs' position was quite illogical. Their paper said that the creation of an effective Vietnamese Army under existing conditions was impossible, but they were nevertheless prepared to undertake the task because of political considerations. In other words, they would agree to do that which they had just declared to be unwise and impossible. Actually, the Joint Chiefs designed their statement as a bureaucratic compromise, to put on record the military's objections to the training program and thereby shift responsibility to the political leaders while at the same time allowing the program to proceed.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff, and particularly the Army staff, had recently succeeded in preventing the commitment of American combat forces in Vietnam. Having risked much, fought hard, and won the fight, Army leaders thought it foolish to quarrel over the relatively minor issue of American training assistance. As the Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations, Lt. Gen. James M. Gavin, recalled, "we in the Army were so relieved that we had blocked the decision to commit ground troops to Vietnam that we were in no mood to quibble."[45] Whatever the motives, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had agreed to a proposal that set in motion a chain of events that would soon prove irreversible.

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Dulles and Diem